



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHAN KU

Spinning a yarn

Johan Ku just returned from New York, where he won the top prize in the avant-garde design category for this year's Gen Art's Styles International Design Competition

BY NOAH BUCHAN
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Johan Ku (古文) breezes into the coffee shop in Gongguan (公館) on Sunday morning where we have arranged to meet. Outsized and transparent bags dangle from both shoulders, each one stuffed with his *Emotional Sculpture*, a series of knitted creations that earned him the top prize at this year's Gen Art's Styles International Design Competition in the avant-garde design category.

"I have a lot of interviews today," he said setting down his load on an adjoining table.

It's his first morning back from overseas and there is little in his rapid movements and energetic demeanor to indicate that the 30-year-old has spent the past 24 hours in transit from London, where he is studying at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design.

As we talk about his award (strange), school (humiliating) and future plans (exhibits) over coffee, Ku receives a barrage of phone calls from the local media congratulating him and requesting their 15 minutes of his time.

Taipei Times: How do you feel about winning?

Johan Ku: I feel a little bit weird because I did *Emotional Sculpture* many years ago and five years later people in Taiwan suddenly realize: "You are a great designer." It's a little strange.

TT: Why are you only gaining recognition in Taiwan now?

JK: I'm somewhat afraid to say this but I think Taiwanese lack confidence not only in themselves but also in judging work. So they need others to judge them and then they have the confidence to say that it is good.

TT: That's interesting because an international designer like Jason Hu is from Taiwan. You would think that with this kind of talent Taiwan's design industry would have more confidence in itself.

JK: This is one of the reasons why I went abroad because I know it's difficult to find opportunities here. People might think that your work is good but because you are Taiwanese they are afraid to say you are good. But if you are from Switzerland or Britain your work is good.

TT: When you first heard your name announced what was your reaction?

JK: Thank god I won because there was some media there from Taiwan. If I had lost what could they write? "Taiwanese designer goes to America and loses"?

TT: Were you nervous when you went up to give your speech?

JK: Not really. I felt excited. I've participated in many awards in the past but it's my first award abroad. It was my second day in New York and my first time to the US. After that day I became extremely busy. All the press was looking for me.

TT: During your speech you thanked your mother? Why?

JK: I lost my father when I was 3 years old. So I think my mother is very important because at that time she could have remarried or abandoned us. She chose the toughest way to bring us up and I really appreciate that.

TT: Did she encourage you to pursue fashion?

JK: No. She encouraged us to do something that we wanted to do but not only fashion. She opened all the windows and said that we could choose anything we wanted. Just don't become a bad kid, please.

TT: You won in the avant-garde category. Did any designers at the Gen Art's competition inspire you?

JK: Not really. I think part of the reason is that I am a mature designer already. So I don't need to get the inspiration from the other fashion designers. As a fashion designer you should get inspiration from the fabric itself, not only the fashion.

TT: Have any magazines expressed interest in your work?

JK: Yes, *Elle* Taiwan and *Vogue* Taiwan have both offered me invitations. And *Elle* Taiwan said they would like to use me, or my design, for the cover of their February issue. But I would prefer they use my designs.

TT: Do you currently have an agent?

JK: Not yet but I'm looking for that right now. And some people want to sign a contract with me. — for example, the boss of Xue Xue Institute (學學文創展坊). She has a lot of resources to help me promote my work.



Fashion designer Johan Ku poses with his Gen Art's trophy and a model wearing one of his creations at a press conference on Monday. PHOTO: SUNG GHIN-HSUNG, TAIPEI TIMES

TT: You mentioned that you are hoping to have an exhibit at Eslite Bookstore.

JK: After winning the award, they said that Eslite is not qualified for me. They think that I should exhibit my stuff at the national and not the local level. But for me, I still think it is a good opportunity.

TT: When will the exhibit come out?

JK: Maybe at the beginning of January. But they need time to promote and set up the exhibit. But they need to set this up before Jan. 4 because that is the beginning of the new term of study at Central Saint Martins — although I don't like to study there.

TT: Why do you say that?

JK: For example, we just had a group tutorial of about 10 students with Louise Wilson. I remember the first student who presented his work in front of Louise and she just humiliated him. I use the word humiliate [because] it is the perfectly right word. "Do you think this is really fashionable? Huh?" This kind of song. And she also said something naughty like, "Oh, I don't like the face you drew. I don't like the poster you drew. They are not the Central Saint Martin's style."

And that's not the worst part. The worst part is, for example, this is the [student's] sketchbook and Louise just looked at it and then did this [Ku throws the book down on

to the table]. "This book is rubbish." That was the end of the tutorial for that student. Nothing positive. No encouragement. So that student doesn't know how to improve himself. And she humiliated him in front of all the students.

(Wilson seems to be under no illusions about herself. In an interview with *Hint*, an online fashion magazine, she anecdotally characterized Central Saint Martins as "a hellhole," and her own teaching style as "[v]ery hands-on with lots of interaction. I work very much by tutorials, or going up and moaning at everybody ... It's my job to point out when something is badly done, or when there's no point of view.")

JK: This is why I don't think it's an appropriate course and if I had to use my own budget I would reconsider that.

(Ku earned a one-year scholarship from the British Council to attend Central Saint Martins. He is currently partway through the first year of a two-year master's degree.)

TT: What advice, if any, would you give emerging Taiwanese designers?

JK: Don't give up. Don't give up. It's a frustrating industry. You seldom get attention from the media here and also many Taiwanese think that you are not such a great designer or they humiliate you or your design. You should have confidence in yourself. You should know what you are doing and what the value is about your work. And that's what I do. I know the value of my work and I have confidence about the judgment of others.

TT: When we last spoke it seemed clear that you have extensive knowledge of Taiwan's textile industry. Does this knowledge help you to maneuver around and think about the fashion industry?

JK: Yes, exactly. [In school] we studied both fashion and textile design. So part of textile is the fiber — from fiber, fabric, textile — something like that. We also know the history of Taiwan in terms of the textile industry and that knowledge base helps me to think about what they are thinking and

what is the path I should follow.

So that is why I say that if you want to be a creative or great designer you need broad knowledge. You don't just need knowledge of fashion only. That's what I see in Central Saint Martins. The focus there is just fashion, nothing else. No textiles. No history. They don't even have a global view, I think, because they think they are the best one in the world.

So Central Saint Martins is some kind of myth or fairy tale. A wonderland. And once I got to the wonderland I think, "Come on, that's it?" That's how I felt and feel now.

TT: That's right. Before you went you were excited but now you seem disappointed.

JK: I should say that if it were the case that I had paid [tuition] I would tell Louise Wilson to shut up and teach me properly.

I have to reconsider whether or not I'll continue my studies next year because I have to pay it myself. I have to consider my career and the budget. With \$8,000 (NT\$420,000) I could hold my own show in New York. Why should I put my budget here and do things that teachers want and not what I want? I want the freedom. I am not there to be your dog, to listen to you bitch.

TT: That's really surprising that you are considering going out on your own. I remember you mentioned that one reason why you didn't accept a scholarship from the Taiwan Textile Federation (紡拓會) was because they stipulated that you would have to return to Taiwan immediately upon graduation, thereby eliminating the possibility of working at a fashion house overseas.

JK: Yeah, sure. The reason why I wanted to work for another brand was to gain experience. I wanted to use my eyes and my ears to know what is happening there, what they are doing there. So if I can find the budget in Taiwan to run my own business, I can get into the fashion industry immediately to run my own brand and attend fashion week.

TT: Are you working on any designs right now?

JK: I've been thinking about that for many days. I've already received many initiations. But nothing final yet.